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The Nuclear Condition in the 21st Century: techno-political aspects in historical and contemporary perspectives Editorial

Richard Beardsworth/Hartmut Behr/Timothy Luke

I) Background and the framing of the debate

This Special Issue is composed of seven closely interlinked papers and one editorial introduction. All papers emanate from two workshops under the aegis of a UK Leverhulme grant on the convergence of Classical Realism and Critical Theory.¹ The workshops were held at Virginia Tech in June 2015 and Aberystwyth University in January 2016. The papers were subsequently presented at a panel at ISA, Atlanta, March 2016. The Special Issue is the second that comes out of this research grant's activities, with the first being more theoretical, putting in dialogue Classical Realist and Critical Theory texts. The interlocution of these two bodies of thought has its common focus in the observation that their advocates hold much more in common than is usually assumed in the discipline of International Relations (henceforth IR). Indeed, in orthodox accounts both are regarded as opposites, and more often than not Critical Theorists are used to attack the ostensible tenets of Classical Realism. In sum, the papers in the Special Issue "Interlocuting Classical Realism and Critical Theory: Negotiating 'Divides' in International Relations Theory" (2017) showed the theoretical benefit of reading Classical Realism from the perspectives of critical theorising: which consists mainly in freeing Classical Realism from the grip of positivist IR, in overcoming the juxtaposition of "isms" in the discipline, and, in advancing disciplinary debates regarding analysis of Western modernity, crises and existential questions of humanity. Accordingly, as the first Special Issue aimed to show, the framing of IR and international politics in "isms" is not only historically false and misleading; it is intellectually constraining.

One such existential question is the theme of this second Special Issue: the nuclear condition in the twenty-first century. Putting Classical Realists and Critical

¹ We capitalize these terms throughout so as to identify them as two distinct bodies of thought or traditions within, respectively, International Relations and the social sciences and humanities more widely.

Theorists into dialogue is here analytically promising from a less theoretical, more practical viewpoint: genuine discussions based on existential fears can be offered rather than discussions framed through the constraints of opposing bodies of thought. Advocates of Critical Theory and of Classical Realism experienced the emergence of atomic energy and their use for military purposes first hand in the late 1940s and shared their observations, criticism, and concerns about (the survival of) the human species. Thus, the major focus of the research in the first Special Issue—the focus on modernity, crises, and humanity—is taken up here practically. Bringing both bodies of thought to bear on each other has a liberating effect, in other words, not only for our historical understanding of Classical Realist and Critical Theory texts, but also for our own analytical focus beyond orthodox framings of the nuclear condition.

Not long after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, proponents of Classical Realism and Critical Theory addressed the implications of nuclear arms for international politics and the human condition in general. After V-J Day, the conditionalities of unipolar nuclear military and civil politics constituted a state of exception, which was shocking in the Soviet bloc and comforting in the Western bloc, until the USSR quickly gained its own nuclear capabilities. Many thinkers—ranging from Hans J. Morgenthau to Herbert Marcuse—put forward important ideas about the strategic, political, moral, and existential implications of weaponized nuclear energy in the ensuing years.² Morgenthau and Marcuse were of course not the only ones to respond to the nuclear revolution, but they were undoubtedly the most prominent. We briefly use them here to frame the debates in this Issue.

As Morgenthau gauged world politics after 1945, he stressed how the novelty of nuclear weaponry remained too entangled with traditional military and diplomatic theories and practices from a by-gone era. “There exists,” as a result, “a gap between what we think about our social, political, and philosophic problems and the objective conditions which the nuclear age has created” (Morgenthau, 1964: 23). Conversely, Marcuse recognized in the extraordinary strategic stability begotten by the paradox of nuclear force severe intra-national consequences. Containment and deterrence represented a hollow “peace maintained by the constant threat of war,” which “extended to a whole system of domination and coordination,” and strangely unified

² In this Special Issue see Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest’s paper on Gunther Anders as well as the discussion of Albert Einstein by Jan Ruzicka.

“forms of life (and of power) which appear to reconcile the forces opposing the system” (Marcuse, 1964: xliv). In this regard, Marcuse, as Rens van Munster and Casper Sylvest observe elsewhere (2016a; 2016b), carefully rethinks how the nuclear condition is much more than a geopolitical construct, but pervades the everyday existential experience of human beings as such.

For both these major political theorists, it was clear that “the nuclear age ... ushered in a novel period of history” (Morgenthau, 1964: 23). That said, Marcuse’s careful mapping of strategic nuclear deterrence gave greater texture to the novel characteristics of static containment politics. He asks and observes for example:

Does not the threat of an atomic catastrophe that could wipe out the human race also serve to protect the very forces that perpetuate this danger? The efforts to prevent such a catastrophe overshadow the search for its potential causes in contemporary industrial society. These causes remain unidentified, unexposed, unattacked by the public because they recede before the all too obvious threat from without—to the West from the East, to the East from the West. Equally obvious is the need for being prepared, for living on the brink, for facing the challenge. We submit to the peaceful production of the means of destruction, to the perfection of waste, to being educated for a defense which deforms the defenders and that which they defend (Marcuse, 1964: xli).

We can begin to merge the two traditions of Classic Realism and Critical Theory here. Two decades after World War II they deduced the logics of nuclear deterrence and strategic containment and concluded therefrom a paradoxical, contradictory dynamic of nuclear armament by taking the dictum “*si vis pacem, para bellem*” (see Vegetius Renatus, *De Re Militari*) thermonuclear.

Seven decades after the two iconic wartime atomic bombings of Japan, and five decades after Morgenthau’s and Marcuse’s uneasy appraisals of the novel qualities of the nuclear condition from 1945 to 1965, can one remain content today with frustrated assessments of the nuclearized global governance that Morgenthau and Marcuse believed was rising from the nuclear condition (as it developed during the darkest days of the Cold War)? Returning to the paradox of nuclear force that Morgenthau first identified, one must ask how novel this moment from the modernity of the twentieth century is and why so many people still try to live out their “thoughts and act through [their] institutions” from an age that is long gone (Morgenthau, 1964:

23). Further, Marcuse argues that an effective critical theory of society must confront “the problem of historical objectivity” (1964: xlii), and yet too few have willingly engaged in this historical confrontation regarding the nuclear.

Following the parameters of the debate on the nuclear conditions--illustrated clearly by Morgenthau and Marcuse as consisting of new techno-political challenges to national and global governance as well as to the human condition and to political imagination more generally--we can now make concrete the objectives of the Issue and show how they will be dealt with by its individual contributions.

(II) Objectives of the Special Issue

Empirical observations

The papers collected in this Special Issue consider the contemporary nuclear condition from within the theoretical frameworks provided by Classical Realism and Critical Theory. All papers either engage this condition from a historical perspective, inquiring in depth into authors from each tradition who witnessed and discussed the emergence of the nuclear condition at the end of World War II, or employ Critical Theory and/or Classical Realism for their own argument. Since these frameworks emphasize the importance of historical change, the engagement with both traditions also allows contributors to diagnose what is new (or not) about the contemporary nuclear condition in comparison with the conditions of 1948 and 1989. The result is a closely interlinked set of papers that examine, in multiple ways and with both common and different conclusions, reflective, critical responses to contemporary civil and military nuclear politics (see also Schmid’s use of the term ‘nuclearities’ in this Special Issue). Indeed, the conjuncture of new geopolitical constellations and techno-political challenges presents an opportunity to ask to what extent we understand the plural and diverse conditions of nuclear politics and its weaponization *today*. The most important phenomena of such geopolitical constellations and gaps that the papers collected here discuss are:

- new non-state, state, corporate, and non-governmental organizations that will be, or actually are, developing very different understandings of how nuclear weapons should be designed, manufactured, operated, or used as the mutually assured destruction regime (or the Cold War) recedes in history;
- the loss of legacy of nuclear systems from the Cold War as well as their

decreasing credibility, reliability, or functionality;

- new systemic approaches to weaponizing nuclear materials by non-state militias, transnational firms, scientific networks, superpower militaries, or terrorists for a plausible variety of new operational applications;
- new weapon technologies that could render Cold War-era delivery systems less effective or reliable to the point of undermining a logic of mutually assured destruction in a possible nuclear confrontation;
- new supranational actors that might make "zero-option" nuclear governance agreements a viable institutional possibility;
- the advent of new transnational threats—climate change, resource scarcity, global pandemics, etc.—that prompt shifts towards both more global government and, conversely, the possibility of tactical nuclear warfare.

It is clear that 2016 is no longer 1946 or 1989. On the one hand, during the Cold War, the Peoples Republic of China, Israel and India weaponized nuclear energy. Likewise, Brazil, South Africa, and Argentina turned down the same road but stopped when high costs, failed governments or geopolitical realities made the journey too arduous to continue. Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine willingly locked down and then scrapped Soviet systems left in their territory after 1991. On another hand, in the nuclear conditionalities after 1991, Pakistan pushed to build a bomb, and North Korea pulled together resources and expertise from several hidden locations to assemble its own nuclear capabilities, even though both states were under constant scrutiny and pressure by the thermonuclear union of card-carrying nuclear states to cease the military development of nuclear energy. Today's actually existing nuclear condition suggests that new nuclearities are evolving technopolitically.

Specific political consequences follow from this nuclear condition that redound to the question of whether and how the nuclear is governable. We need to talk, accordingly, of a distinct techno-political constellation as the challenge and objective of social and political governance and radical political imagination (from the late 1940s to today and beyond). The import of such imagination is radical because it needs to reach beyond the legacies of our thinking – mainly that of the nation state. The existential dimension of the nuclear remains unprecedented; it therefore requires new rhetorical frameworks that might better meet the challenges

posed by politics experienced in existential terms. As an existential threat, climate change presents something comparable in this regard. Morgenthau's arguments as to the necessity of a world state and of obsolescence of the nation state in the face of the nuclear threat—an argument that resonates with John Herz's concerning the obsolescence of the nation state's "hard shell"—is thus one version of both the technopolitical nature and the consequence of the nuclear condition. At the same time it is a theme of Critical Theory *par excellence*: the technological achievements of modernity are illusory; they do not liberate humanity, indeed their rationalities enslave humanity and humanity's path towards freedom – a formal promise of modernity that is shattered by modernity's concrete face, as argued in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (and again in Marcuse's analysis in *One-dimensional Man*).

The unbroken faith of the successor states to the Cold War in the apocalyptic novelty of the nuclear bomb is, however, still anchored in conventional technopolitics, embedded, in turn, in their on-going deterrence rituals. Yet, are today's actually existing nuclear assemblages more chaotic and complex? Pathetic rusting missile silos in the Great Plains and Central Asia are another marker of tragic narratives of power morphing into dramatic strategies for great power politics no longer beholden to superpower hegemony. Those concerns, however, are so vast that no one set of analyses can address them. Consequently, this Special Issue will foreground only a few examples in order to probe the major tensions and problematics of today's nuclear condition in its shifting nuclearity. It appears clear that, as the technopolitical order distributed between things and people, systems and sites, and hazards and threats evolves, nuclearity in 2017 is no longer fixated upon the inter-operating impasses of mutually assured destruction.

Conceptual consequences

Nuclearity then is to be seen not as an essential attribute of radioactive rocks, metals or elements, but rather as a techno-political quality that is created, discursively and practically, and then "distributed among things" (Hecht, 2012: 14). It also entails new meanings, purposes or uses from the Iraq war, Israel's nuclearization, North Korea, Iranian science, Fukushima Daiichi, Syrian subterfuges, power dynamics on the Indian subcontinent, and the emerging geopolitics of the possibility of nuclear terrorism. Hecht is correct: "How places, objects or hazards get designated as 'nuclear' has often been contentious," and thereby "designating something as nuclear

-- whether in technoscientific, political or medical terms -- carries high stakes” (Hecht, 2012: 8). The common conceptual core of all papers is, accordingly, rehearsed through four foci:

- i) the materiality of the nuclear condition and its political implications and challenges;
- ii) this condition’s existential dimension and attempts to create nuclear normalcy;
- iii) techno-political responses to nuclear materiality and the question of nuclear governance (world government, deterrence, and arms control);
- iv) the need for comprehensive political imagination with regard to the nuclear condition as a whole: this need for comprehensive imagination always includes the possibility that the nuclear condition *is*, however, ungovernable.

The techno-political materiality of the nuclear condition in the 21st century hence evinces governance challenges with regard to questions of world government, arms control, and deterrence—challenges that put into question the governability of the nuclear condition and raise the question of whether its materiality results in a life of its own that withdraws from political governance. If this thought were correct, then the theoretically charted nightmare of Critical Theorists concerning the inhumane consequences of modern technology--not humanity’s advance but a regression—would have become a melodramatic reality. The nuclear condition would be left to technocratic expertise, to inherent necessities, to practical constraints and to radical immanence (see the paper by Daniel Levine in this SI)—a total depoliticization that calls into question the very possibility of politics in the nuclear age (unless political imagination becomes radical). Here, the lack of meaningful progress on nuclear disarmament and abolition since the invention of nuclear arms is telling since there has been no shortage of attempts to achieve this abolition since their invention following WWII.

In addition, we have evidence not only of the fragility of nuclear machines and devices, but also of how fragile and artificial the assumed *boundary* between “peaceful” and “military” purposes is. And yet, each new “nuclear deal” affirms and re-affirms this supposed boundary, as the community of scholars and policy-makers who push for nuclear security and the special circumstances of the techno-political (including the self-destructive capacity of nuclearity embedded in a disenchanting

modernity), and as multinational power companies and the nuclear industry “normalize” the nuclear condition and its challenges. In scholarship and among policy-makers, however, the unique dangers raised by the possibility of nuclear warfare have created an intense debate about what political action is needed to avoid it. Whilst most scholars contend that it is possible to prevent a nuclear war without massive political change, others argue that a substantial solution to the problem demands the abolition of the existing interstate system. Irrespective of how one would negotiate the question of change or continuity in international governance structures, so long as nuclear weapons remain in someone’s possession, the nuclear condition cannot be argued away. It continues to be humanity’s condition.

The *first two papers* by Sonja Schmidt and Columba Peoples analyse in detail the material conditions and discourses of such conditions as they underpin the military and civil uses of nuclear energy. Both papers suggest that only a more holistic techno-political approach to the nuclear condition in the 21st century can deal with present nuclear realities (non-state actors as potential possessors of nuclear weapons and nuclear material; nuclear terrorism; the role of nuclear energy in climate change strategies; nuclear waste; and visions and strategies of delimited nuclear warfare).

The *next two papers* by Daniel Levine and Casper Sylvest/Rens van Munster consider, amidst critical reflection on all four foci, the problem of political language and action under the nuclear condition in an age of consumerism and devitalized political agency (as they argue). On the assumption that the nuclear condition poses existential threats to humankind, they both call for radical (in the sense of fundamental and comprehensive) approaches to rethink language and action that capture such a condition.

The *final three papers* focus specifically on governance aspects of the technopolitical with regard to the exceptionalism of nuclear weaponry. Campbell Craig and Dan Deudney analyse the dilemmas of Classical Realism’s responses to the thermonuclear revolution and suggest, in disagreement with each other, different political architectures to deal with it today. Jan Ruzicka addresses the recent attempt to revitalize the nuclear non-proliferation / disarmament regime through a humanitarian approach, concluding that it provides another (failed) attempt to deal in moral and legal terms with what is an essentially historico-political problem.

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